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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EUR/ACE, ECA, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GETTING AROUND THE ROADBLOCK AT THE
EDUCATION MINISTRY

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: At the Ministry of Education (MOE), Charge made progress in drawing the Minister's attention to continuing concerns with the Embassy's education and exchange programs. This meeting was perhaps the first opportunity to present directly to the Minister information that was previously held or manipulated by International Relations Department head Nury Bayramov, long considered a major obstructionist. The Minister's approach was open and sincere. Bayramov was clearly taken by surprise. The following day, Charge reported his MOE meeting to Foreign Minister Meredov and made clear our frustration with Bayramov. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (SBU) On August 27 Charge, Peace Corps (PC) Country Director, Public Affairs Officer, and USAID Country Representative met Minister of Education Muhammetgeldi Annaamanov and "his staffer" Nury Bayramov, head of the Ministry's International Relations Department.

SETTING THE SCENE

¶4. (SBU) Charge explained he had recently been in two meetings at which President Berdimuhamedov had told high-level U.S. visitors he wants more education exchanges and cooperation with the United States. Charge noted education is one of the five key areas in which the United States and Turkmenistan have already agreed to cooperate in the new "turned-page" bilateral relationship. He said, "We are ready for this cooperation." Looking at the minister and ignoring Bayramov, Charge stated, "I am ready to cooperate directly with you to achieve the success President Berdimuhamedov says he wants."

EASIER TOPICS

¶5. (U) The Charge, PC Director and Annaamanov exchanged positive views about the smooth progress of bringing in the next round of volunteers. Annaamanov agreed to the PC director's request to have direct access to the ministry in difficult cases where there may be miscommunication about specific volunteers.

NON-PAPER DIRECT TO THE MINISTER

¶16. (SBU) The Charge's non-paper in Russian for Minister Annaamanov on long-outstanding specific issues and programs that need a response proved to be an effective way to get information directly to the Minister. On the issue of the Ministry's responses for Fulbright Senior Specialists and their preferences and placements, Annaamanov promised a reply "tomorrow" via diplomatic note, after a final "review." [COMMENT: We'll see. END COMMENT.]

¶17. (SBU) On every point, Bayramov leaned over to brief the minister loudly, even while the Charge was still speaking. At one point, the Charge said, "Excuse me. I'm still speaking. Will you let me finish my point?"

SLIGHT PANIC IN NURY'S EYES

¶18. (SBU) When the Charge highlighted the Embassy's support for a Government of Turkmenistan-sponsored study-abroad program in the United States and the lack of MOE response, Annaamanov appeared bewildered. Nevertheless, he was pleased with the idea. As an immediate follow up, PAO provided Annaamanov with a Russian-language copy of the proposal on how the Embassy and local implementing partner ACCELS could help get the program started, which had been provided to Bayramov in April. Again, it was apparent that Annaamanov was seeing this proposal for the first time. Bayramov hurriedly tried to explain the program and proposal to the Minister, and was overheard advising that it could be expensive. Charge then explained the program and added a personal suggestion that President Berdimuhamedov might consider announcing it during his upcoming visit to the UN General Assembly in September in New York.

¶19. (SBU) In addition, Annaamanov approved in principle the idea of

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working directly with the Embassy on routine issues and existing exchange programs - but only if the foreign minister directly authorizes him to do so.

FOREIGN MINISTER GETS THE MESSAGE

¶10. (SBU) At a meeting with Foreign Minister Meredov on August 28, Charge reported his meeting with Minister Annaamanov. He emphasized he likes and respects the minister and feels they can work well together to enhance U.S. cooperation with Turkmenistan in education and exchanges, as President Berdimuhamedov has made clear he wants. Charge recounted when he asked Minister Annaamonov to allow working-level contacts between the embassy and the ministry without diplomatic notes, the minister had said that would be a good idea, but the foreign ministry would have to authorize him officially to do so.

¶11. (SBU) Meredov looked a little annoyed and said, "Months ago I authorized all ministries to work with the U.S. embassy on a daily basis without diplomatic notes. Why doesn't he know that?" Charge responded, "It could be because he is not getting good advice." Meredov grimaced, "Bayramov?"

¶12. (SBU) Charge said, "Because our new relationship is very important to both our governments and we want it to succeed, I want to speak very frankly, recognizing I do not have the right to interfere in your government's internal affairs. I strongly feel Nury Bayramov is working against our cooperation." Meredov scowled and said, "Understood."

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: It is clear to us Minister Annaamonov is open to cooperation and communication. But he is very timid. It is equally clear Bayramov is the roadblock. And he is a world-class manipulator. We know the foreign ministry has been aware for some time Bayramov is a problem. Whether any action is taken remains to be seen. Charge will continue to work directly with Minister Annaamonov until we begin to get our education and exchange programs on an even keel. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND